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A CHRYSELEPHANTINE STATUETTE OF THE CRETAN SNAKE GODDESS

[PLATES X–XVI]

THE statuette illustrated on PLATES X–XVI was acquired by the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, in 1914, as a gift from Mrs. W. Scott Fitz.[1] According to information believed to be reliable, it came originally from Crete, but no details as to the time, place and circumstances of its discovery have been ascertained. It is carved in ivory, richly decorated with gold, and measures 0.161 m. or about $6\frac{1}{2}$ inches in height.

PLATES X–XII show the figure as it is now exhibited in the Museum. The goddess stands proudly with her arms held out to the front, and grasps in each hand a gold snake which lifts its head and coils its tail about the forearm. Though the pose is strictly frontal, it is not stiff and rigid, but on the contrary full of life and energy. The lower part of the body slopes forward slightly, the shoulders are drawn back, and the chin is held in, so that the outline of the back forms one sweeping curve from the top of the headdress to the waist. It is the pose which is illustrated by all the known representations of Minoan men and women, and which seems not to have been an artistic convention, but a feature of the actual appearance of this aristocratic race.[2]

[1] It has been briefly described by the present writer in the *Bulletin* of the Museum, XII, 1914, pp. 51 ff. (4 figs.), and in a paper read at the Annual Meeting of the Archaeological Institute of America in December 1914. Cf. *Art and Archaeology* I, March 1915, p. 211. Professor E. A. Gardner has discussed it in *Ancient Egypt*, 1915, Part I, pp. 49 ff. on the basis of photographs, enlargements of which he reproduces. A notice in the *Burlington Magazine*, XXVII, 1915, p. 45, ends with these words: "the provenance is not stated, and the illustration gives an unfavorable impression of the work which must await further elucidation." It is hoped that the photographs of the statuette here published and the accompanying detailed description will furnish to those at a distance the materials for forming a just estimate of its worth.

[2] Cf. Rodenwaldt, *Tiryns*, II, p. 70.

The goddess wears the characteristic Minoan costume, consisting of an elaborate headdress, a tight-fitting jacket cut so low in front as to leave the breasts completely exposed, and a full skirt with five pleated flounces. But before describing this costume in detail, it will be well to examine for a moment the condition of the statuette on its arrival in Boston, before the repairs were undertaken which have restored, so far as was possible, its original appearance.

The ivory is preserved in a fairly sound condition, but badly split and warped, especially in the lower part, so that several fragments had to be separated before they could be handled (cf. PLATE XV). The body was made in two pieces; the joint ran across the skirt near the bottom of the second flounce, and was partly concealed by the gold band which decorated the hem. An oblong vertical projection, left on the lower piece at the back, extends almost to the waist, and the joint was further secured by a cylindrical ivory pin placed near the front, a little to the left of the centre. As appears clearly in the photographs, the upper part of the body had begun to split in two, laterally, while the statuette was still in use; to check this tendency a hole was drilled in obliquely from behind at the left side, and an ivory pin inserted. The arms also were carved separately, and secured by means of dove-tailed tenons, about 0.015 m. long, which were slid from above into corresponding mortises in the body. The exquisitely carved left arm, thanks to the gold band and snake which encircle it, is preserved practically intact. A similar gold band and the fore-part of a second snake were also found, together with some fragments of the right arm; but the latter were too small and fragile to be used in the reconstruction. The gold girdle remains in position, as well as the small gold nail which represents the nipple of the right breast; the nail in the left breast has been lost owing to the splitting of the ivory. Of the gold decoration there are preserved also five narrow bands of thin gold plate, four of which certainly belong to the hems of the flounces, a small strip of gold pierced by three nail holes, and six of the nails by which the bands were fastened (two of them in place on the front of the skirt). Numerous drill holes in the body make it clear that there was more of this gold decoration which has been lost.

After the fragments had been impregnated with paraffin they were put together as shown on PLATE XVI. The left arm was

then replaced in exactly the original pose as indicated by the joint and socket, and the right arm was restored in plaster in order to make use of the band which encircled it and the fore-part of the snake which the hand held. The tail-part of this snake is a restoration in lead, plated with gold. The missing portions of the skirt have been filled out with wax, making it possible to replace the gold hems of the flounces. As may be seen in the photographs (PLATE XVI) enough of the bottom surface of the figure is preserved to give its height with certainty. The original tip of the nose which had flaked off was discovered by the repairer among the numerous tiny fragments of ivory and replaced, adding greatly to the individual character of the profile.[1]

PLATES XIII and XIV show two enlarged views of the head. This is in the main well preserved, though the forehead, the left eye, and the left side are injured. The elaborate headdress, or crown, is of a type which appears to be without parallels in Minoan art. It curves up at the front, back, and sides in semi-circular form, and a small cylindrical piece, now much damaged, rises in the centre. Each of the four semi-circular divisions is pierced near the top for the attachment of a rosette or some other ornament, probably of gold, and the one at the front is further decorated with a small raised disk, or boss. A gold band encircled the crown near the bottom, as is proved by a nail hole at the back. The hair over the forehead is treated as a slightly raised mass in which is a row of seven drilled holes, about 6 mm. deep, with shallow circular depressions between them. On the analogy of the well known ivory heads from Knossos (Fig. 1, reproduced from *B.S.A.* VIII, p. 72, figs. 37, 38), it may be confidently asserted that these holes held small gold curls, and that they did not serve for the attachment of a gold wreath, or diadem, as Gardner has suggested. Numerous frescoes show that such loose tendrils of hair floating about the forehead were a characteristic

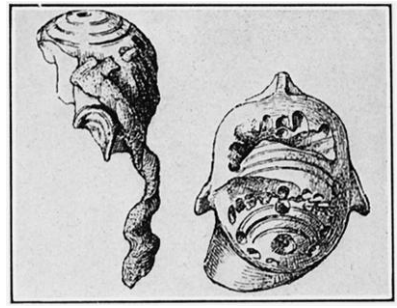


FIGURE 1.—TWO IVORY HEADS FROM KNOSSOS

[1] The repairs have been executed with great skill and patience by Mr. Paul Hoffmann at the Museum. For the new right arm we are indebted to Mr. Donald Quigley, a pupil at the Museum Art School.

feature of the Minoan lady's coiffure. At the back the hair falls in a mass of wavy locks a little below the shoulders. The strands, carved with great delicacy and freedom, are best preserved on the right side (PLATE XIII). The face is rather long, narrowing gradually to the small, prominent chin, and with somewhat abrupt transitions from the front to the sides. The eyes (only one is preserved) were narrow, with accentuated lids, and, as Gardner has noted, sunk to their natural depth below the brow. The pupils were indicated by drilled holes. The most surprising feature of the face is the nose with its outline composed of a concave and a convex curve, and its dilated nostrils. It differs entirely from the usual Minoan type, as illustrated by the frescoes and the ivory heads of acrobats. The carving of the small mouth with its protruding upper lip add much to the life-like character of the profile. It is noteworthy that the ear is of natural size, and all but correctly placed—another point in which this differs from most of the known Minoan representations.



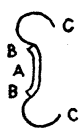
FIGURE 2.—TWO FAIENCE STATUETTES FROM KNOSSOS

The four views of the figure on PLATE XVI show clearly the various drill-holes which furnish conclusive evidence as to the arrangement of the gold bands. A hole in the base of the neck and one on either side of it served to attach a necklace. The jacket resembled closely those of the two faïence statuettes from Knossos (Fig. 2).[1] It extended up to the neck behind, and had

[1] *B.S.A.* IX, pp. 74 ff., figs. 54–57. The illustration is reproduced from he University of Pennsylvania *Museum Journal* V, 1914, p. 154, fig. 88.

tightly fitting sleeves reaching half way to the elbows. The hems of the sleeves are represented by gold bands, both of which are preserved. They are decorated with an incised pattern consisting of short horizontal strokes arranged in vertical rows. A hole in the top of the left arm suggests that ornaments of some sort were fastened on the shoulders. The edges of the jacket ran downwards from each side of the neck, leaving the breasts exposed, and were brought together in front at the waist. Originally these edges were marked by gold bands, as is proved by the rivet holes in the sides of the breasts (see PLATE XVI). Experiments with strips of paper showed that bands of gold, similar to those on the skirt and fastened with nails at either side of the neck, at the sides of the breasts and at the waist in front, could be made to lie flat against the ivory throughout their whole extent. The V-shaped opening in front was filled with a strip of gold which has fortunately been preserved. It is pierced by three holes which correspond exactly with the three holes in the front of the body; and further proof of its location is afforded by the fact that it is bent in at the bottom to fit the groove which runs around the waist. The upper end of the strip is broken off, showing that it was continued upwards, probably in the form of a loop, such as is represented in a corresponding position on the faïence figures of the snake goddess and her votary.

The slender waist is confined by a girdle of the characteristic Minoan form, a concave hoop of gold. It is fastened by a nail at the back, and slopes downward from front to rear. Just above it is the shallow groove already referred to, and there is a corresponding groove below. Both are parallel to the girdle, and seem to have some connection with it. A possible explanation of them is suggested by a comparison with the belt of the Knossian cupbearer, as described by Myres, *B.S.A.* IX, p. 365: "The concave profile *a* is the belt itself, which from its colour, and thin edges, seems to have been a smooth plate of metal. Its out-turned edges *b–b* prevent it from chafing the body of the wearer; and this end is further secured by the torus mouldings



c–c which seem from their form to represent a padded cushion-like belt of some elastic material which enabled a very considerable pressure to be applied either by means of the metal belt itself or by a tightly drawn lace or thong wound closely upon its concave surface. In the latter case the smooth ends of the metal belt would slide

over one another as the pressure was applied; and this would explain the absence of any sign of a metallic catch, and also the presence of a lace outside the metallic belt. The loose-looking swollen belts from the shrine of the Serpent-Goddess at Knossos very likely represent the cushion *c–c*."[1] Assuming that this explanation is correct, we may suppose that rings (of gold, or perhaps of a differently colored metal) were placed around the waist of the ivory figure above and below the concave belt, to represent this same pad or cushion. The grooves would keep them from slipping out of position.

The skirt is made with five flounces, the hems of which are decorated with bands of thin gold plate. Each band fitted closely into a depression cut along the edge of the flounce, and was held firmly in place by four gold nails. The bands increase in width from the uppermost to the lowest,[2] and each has a different

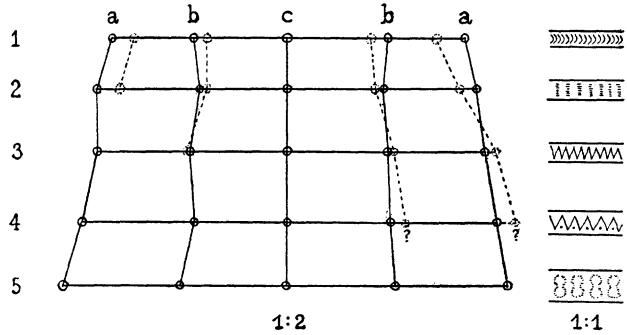


FIGURE 3.—DIAGRAM OF NAIL HOLES AND GOLD BANDS

incised pattern (cf. Fig. 3). That on the second band recurs on the hems of the sleeves. The zig-zag pattern with dots in the angles, on the fourth band, is found also on the jacket of the dancing girl on a fresco from Knossos (*B.S.A.* VIII, p. 55, fig. 28); and the row of 8-shaped shields, on the lowest band, is a

[1] Evans, *B.S.A.* IX, p. 83, has a different explanation of the votive girdles from Knossos. Observing their resemblance to the snakes tied about the hips of the larger faïence statuette, he supposes that the girdles had a special ritual significance, and that "the original rolls from which they are copied may actually have contained some form of mummied snake." It is also noteworthy that the double rolls on the votive robes, *ibid.*, fig. 58, are placed about the hips, not about the waist.

[2] The widths are approximately: (1) 2 mm.; (2) and (3) 2½ mm.; (4) 3 mm.; (5) 4 mm.

familiar Minoan motive. This band runs horizontally around the bottom of the skirt; the others are brought down to a point in front, curve up at the sides and down again at the back. Whether the front of the skirt was flat, as it has been restored, or whether there was a slight depression running down the centre, such as is represented on a number of gems and frescoes, remains uncertain; the former alternative is, however, the more probable. As the result of the splitting of the ivory the circumference of the skirt at the bottom has been considerably increased, and the three lowest bands no longer reach completely around it. The second band fits exactly, but the first is too long. This state of affairs is illustrated by the diagram (Fig. 3), in which the spacing of the nail-holes in the five bands is indicated by the black lines, and the relation of the holes in the skirt to one another, less accurately, by the dotted lines. The lack of correspondence of the two sets of holes in the top row suggested the possibility that the band No. 1 might be the missing border of the jacket. The distance between the holes *a* and *b* does in fact correspond with the distance from the holes in the neck to those in the breasts; but the distance *b*–*c* is much greater than that from the holes in the breasts to any of the three holes in front. The band has therefore been placed on the skirt, though it remains doubtful whether it originally belonged there.

As in several representations of Minoan dress, the topmost flounce is treated differently from the four others.[1] The latter have vertical grooves carved on them, representing fine pleats. The surface of the former is rippled horizontally at the back and sides, but left smooth in front in the space included between two lines marked by the two sets of holes which run from the waist to the first band. Evidently two strips of gold were attached here, each by three rivets. The theory of Gardner, *l. c.*, that these rivets may have held pendants from the girdle, would seem to be excluded by the variation in the treatment of

[1] *E.g.*, the smaller of the two faïence statuettes from Knossos (Fig. 2); the figures in the unpublished miniature fresco from Knossos representing a religious ceremony in a grove; engravings on gems and gold rings, such as Furtwängler, *Antike Gemmen*, pl. I, 26; pl. VI, 2, 3. The seated lady on the fresco from Hagia Triada, *Mon. Ant.* XIII, 1903, pl. X and the lady carrying a cista recently found at Tiryns (*Tiryns*, II, pl. VIII) might also be cited, though in both cases the decoration of the upper flounce is repeated below. The theory of MacKenzie (*B.S.A.* XII, p. 20) that the upper flounce is a survival of the primitive loin-cloth to which the jacket and skirt were later added, is a pure conjecture, as Rodenwaldt has observed (*Tiryns*, II, p. 79).

the surface. In the discussion of the statuette in the *Bulletin*, it was suggested that the strips formed the border of a small apron. But the resemblance to the double-apron, or panier, worn by the faïence figures, which led to this explanation, is slight. It may be preferable to assume that a piece of cloth of a different material was set into the front of the flounce, and more richly ornamented. Though no traces of paint are preserved, it may be regarded as certain that the details of the garments were distinguished from one another and from the adjoining flesh parts by the use of different colors. Evans in his discussion of the ivories from Knossos (*B.S.A.* VIII, p. 73) regards it as probable "that the male figures at any rate were originally stained of a ruddy hue." In the present statuette the flesh would be left in the natural tone of the ivory, but the headdress, the jacket and the flounces of the skirt lend themselves to a rich polychrome treatment, an opportunity of which a Minoan artist would not fail to make full use.

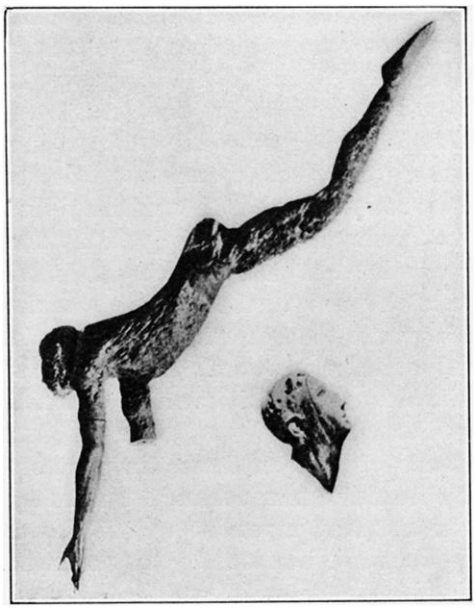


FIGURE 4.—IVORY FIGURE AND HEAD FROM KNOSSOS

Except for the headdress and the treatment of the upper flounce of the skirt, the statuette adds no new details to our knowledge of Minoan costume. Its unique importance lies in the fact that it is the first representation of a female figure in the round yet discovered, which is worthy to be ranked with the male figures found at Knossos in 1902 (*B.S.A.* VIII, p. 72, pls. II, III, figs. 37–39).[1] Made of the same precious materials and

[1] Though ivory was much used by Minoan artists in decorative work, *e.g.*, seal-stones, mirror handles, sword-hilts, etc., very few examples of figures in

corresponding in several points of technique, it resembles them also in the animation of the pose, the mastery of anatomy shown in the modelling of the arms, and the delicate carving of details. The best preserved of the Knossian statuettes represents an acrobat in mid-air, presumably leaping over the back of a charging bull (Fig. 4). In the words of Sir Arthur Evans "the life, the freedom, the élan of these ivory figures is nothing short of marvellous and in some respects seems to overpass the limits of the sculptor's art. The graceful fling of the legs and arms, the backward bend of the head and body give a sense of untrammeled motion, to a certain extent attainable in painting or relief, but which it is hard to reconcile with the fixity of position inherent in statuary in the round. . . . The naturalistic treatment of the individual parts of the body is quite in keeping with the animated appearance of the whole. The set of the arms and shoulders and the well-developed breast of the figure point to careful physical training, and the slender limbs reveal great sinewy strength, though in some examples the treatment of the flesh is softer, and may be due to a difference of sex." The problem which the artist of the snake goddess set himself called for a less daring treatment, but in imparting such vigorous life to the quietly standing little figure he has accomplished a feat which seems hardly less marvellous, and which proves him to have belonged to the same school. As has been said above, this impression is given especially by the poise of the head and shoulders which are thrown back to balance the extended arms; and the slight forward slope of the lower part of the body and the modelling of the abdomen contribute to the realistic effect.

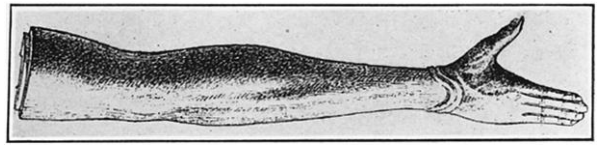


FIGURE 5.—ARM OF IVORY FIGURE FROM KNOSSOS

the round in this material have survived. A fragment of a female statuette is published by Tsountas together with other ivories from Mycenae in Ἐφ. Ἀρχ. 1888, pl. VIII. To the same series belongs the well-known helmeted head in relief. Similar heads have been found at Spata (*B.C.H.* II, 1878, pl. XVIII) and at Knossos. Two ivory plaques with delicate reliefs from Palaikastro are illustrated in *B.S.A.* XI, p. 285, fig. 14 a and b. For the combination of gold with ivory cf. several sword-hilts from Mycenae and the gaming board from Knossos (*B.S.A.* VII, p. 79, fig. 25).

The action of the arms being less violent, such detailed rendering of sinews and veins as is found on the arm of the acrobat (Fig. 5) was not necessary. But the left arm gripping the snake is tense and muscular as well as beautifully shaped, and the thumb and fingers are executed with equal care (Fig. 6). Nothing could surpass the delicate carving of the details of the head and of the crown with its subtle curves: it gains, rather than loses, in being enlarged to three times the natural size on PLATES XIII and XIV.

A technical resemblance is afforded by the method of attach-

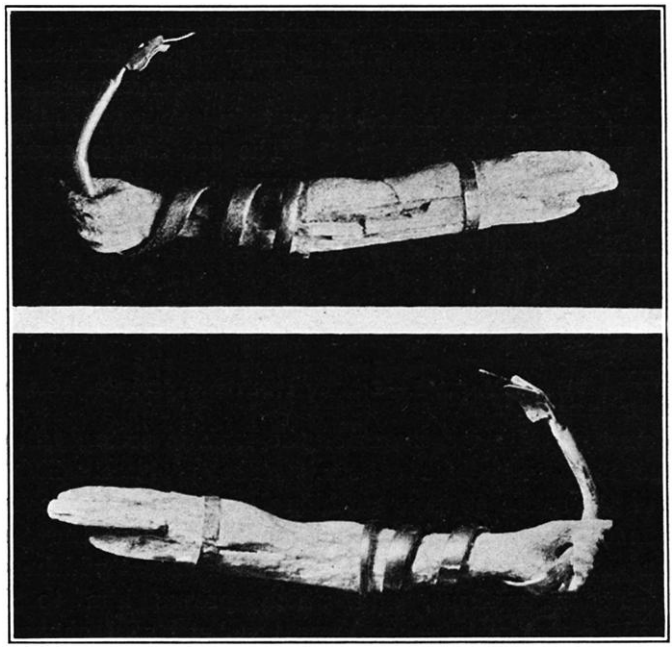


FIGURE 6.—LEFT ARM OF CHRYSELEPHANTINE STATUETTE

ment of the arms; that of the acrobat shows a similar tenon and socket device. The holes over the forehead, which held metal curls, furnish another parallel, and the fragments of thin gold plate found with the Knossian fragments "suggest that the usual loin cloth, which was certainly not wanting, was supplied by its means." In the case of the snake goddess the rich court dress gave an opportunity for a much more lavish application of gold ornament, and its workmanship shows that the artist's skill as a goldsmith was on a par with his skill as a sculptor. The simple

and ingenious technique by which the snakes were fashioned is especially worthy of notice. Except for the head, each was formed of a single flat strip of fairly thick gold, narrowing gradually towards the tail. The front portion was hammered so as to make it thinner and broader. Then it was bent into a tubular form, and passed through the opening between the thumb and fingers like a thread through the eye of a needle. The tail-part was skillfully wound about the fragile fore-arm. A small portion at the forward end was flattened out again, and cut into the shape of a head. A piece of similar outline formed the lower jaw, and a narrow tongue was inserted between the two. The upper and lower pieces were fastened together by three rivets, and the projecting ends of two of these represent the eyes.

The resemblances just described suffice to show that the snake goddess is not "a freak of individual genius" as Gardner has suggested, but a work of the same period and school, perhaps even of the same atelier that produced the ivories from Knossos. The latter were found in the ruins of the later palace, and are therefore to be assigned to the first Late Minoan or possibly to the third Middle Minoan period which is now regarded as marking the culmination of Cretan art. The date of the statuette thus falls within the limits of the sixteenth and fifteenth centuries B.C.

As regards the subject represented, the nearest analogies are of course furnished by the well-known series of figures executed in faïence which were found by Evans in the temple repositories of the later palace at Knossos and explained by him as representations of the great Cretan goddess in her chthonic aspect, and of her votaries. The pose of the ivory statuette is the same as that of the largest of these figures; the chief difference is that she lacks the snakes which are knotted together about the middle of the Knossian goddess. In some respects she resembles more closely the figure of a votary, who wears a flounced skirt and a metallic girdle, and has no snakes twined about her body. But the problem is further complicated. Dussaud, 'Questions Mycéniennes,' *Revue de l'histoire des religions* XXVI, 1905, p. 47, doubts the religious significance of the objects found in the "temple repositories," and Thiersch, *Aegina, das Heiligtum der Aphaia*, p. 372, proposes to call all these figures snake charmers, introduced into Crete from Egypt, and to be placed on a par with the acrobats, male and female, who performed daring

feats with wild bulls for the entertainment of Minoan lords and ladies. And one example cited by Thiersch seems to favor his interpretation. This is the well-known bronze statuette in Berlin (Fig. 7). She stands in a lively, momentary pose which disregards the law of frontality. Her knees are bent slightly, her right hand is raised to her forehead, and her left reaches across to grasp the snake on her right shoulder. The heads of two other snakes appear on the top of her head, and their bodies are knotted together on her back. She wears a flounced skirt, but is naked above the waist. Nothing here suggests the goddess.[1] On the other hand the connection of snakes with the cult of the Minoan goddess is abundantly proved by the Cretan discoveries. The rude, half aniconic image of a goddess rising from a cylindrical

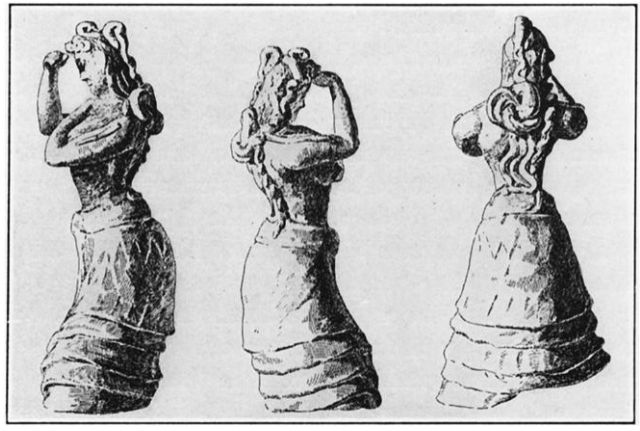


FIGURE 7.—BRONZE STATUETTE IN BERLIN

base found at Prinias[2] and the similar idol discovered in the shrine at Gournia[3] have snakes twined about them. They are seen again on the cylindrical objects found with the idols,[4] which Mrs. Williams calls cultus vases, while Thiersch explains them as examples of the lofty headdress worn by the larger faïence statuette. The central figure of the terra-cotta group found at Palaikastro apparently represents the goddess holding a

[1] A similar statuette from Hagia Triada is reproduced by Mosso, *The Palaces of Crete*, p. 69, fig. 26. Thiersch cites also a statuette published by Furtwängler, *Sitzungsber. der Bayer. Akad.* 1899, p. 560.

[2] Wide, *Ath. Mitt.* XXVI, 1901, p. 248, figs. 1–3.

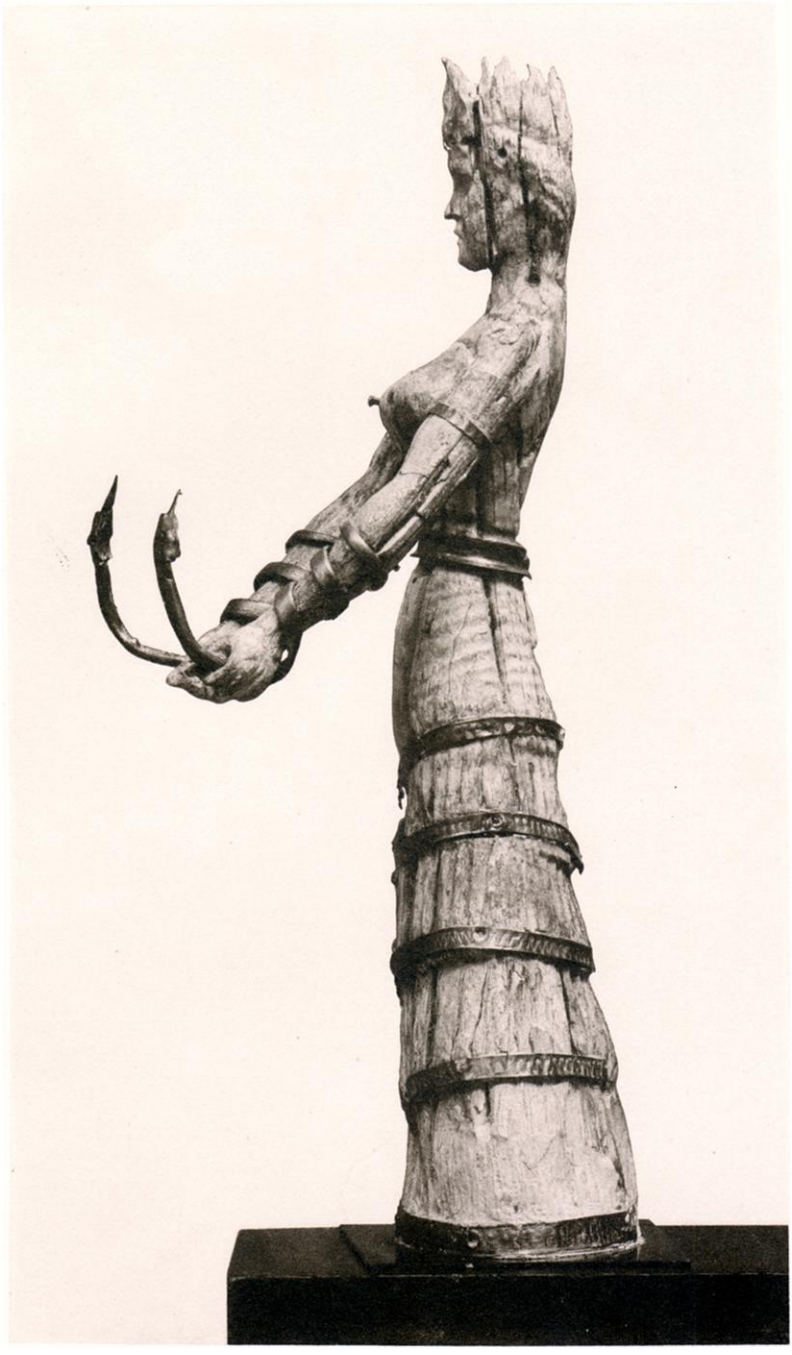
[3] *Gournia*, pl. XI, 1.

[4] Wide, *l. c.*, figs. 4, 5; *Gournia*, pl. XI, 11–13.

snake, while doves are perched on the base in front of her.[1] These idols, together with the evidence accumulated by Evans to the effect that the objects in the temple repositories belong to a shrine, seem sufficient to prove that the faïence figures, and consequently all the others, had a religious significance. If some of them, like the Berlin bronze, are human, they are perhaps best regarded as priestesses who performed magical rites with snakes in honor of the divinity, who is herself represented by the larger of the faïence figures. And the chryselephantine statuette, which is by far the finest of the series, has also the best claim to be regarded as a representation of the central figure of the cult.

MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS,
BOSTON. L. D. CASKEY.

[1] Dawkins, *B.S.A.* X, p. 217, fig. 6; Mosso, *l. c.* p. 283, fig. 136. According to the latter the figure is playing a lyre.



CHRYSELEPHANTINE STATUETTE IN BOSTON



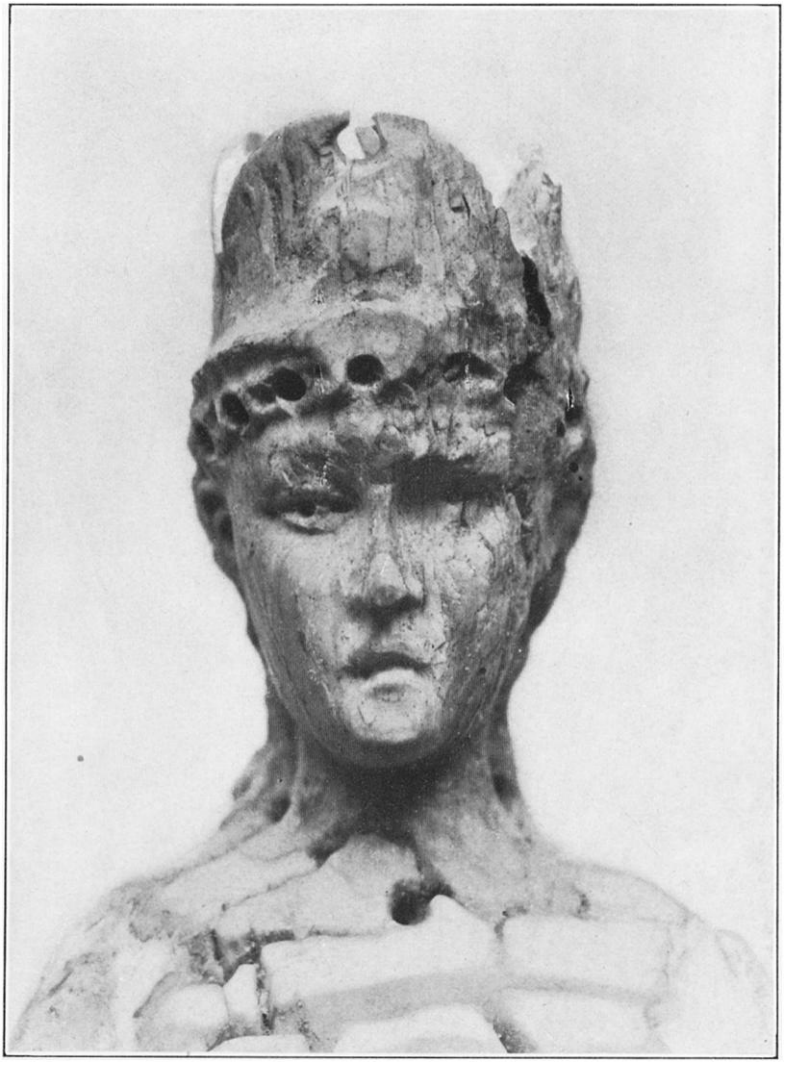
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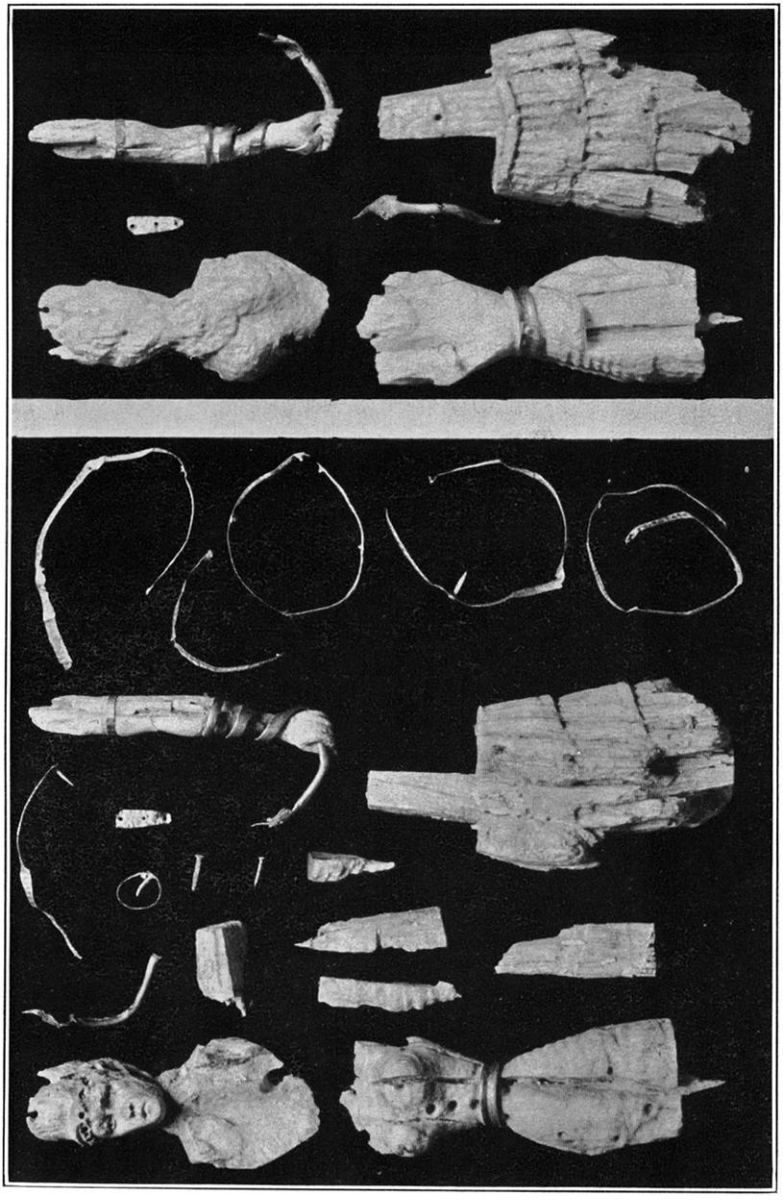
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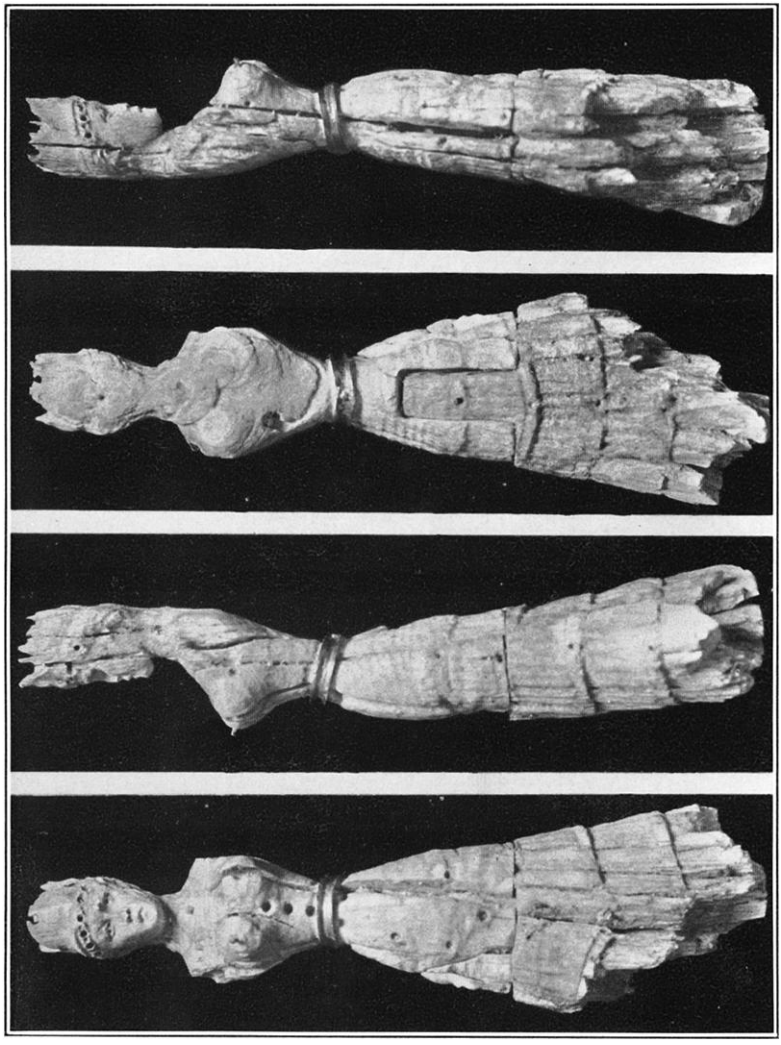
CHRYSELEPHANTINE STATUETTE IN BOSTON: HEAD



CHRYSELEPHANTINE STATUETTE IN BOSTON; HEAD



CHRYSELEPHANTINE STATUETTE IN BOSTON; FRAGMENTS BEFORE RECONSTRUCTION



CHRYSELEPHANTINE STATUETTE IN BOSTON; FOUR VIEWS WITHOUT ARMS